

Ontario needs 'Green voice,' Schreiner says; Guelph MPP says he remains focused on climate action and won't run for Liberal leadership

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Body

Green Party Leader Mike Schreiner says he'd rather fight than switch.

After weeks of courting by a small group of Liberals urging him to run for leader of their party in the wake of its June election debacle - leader Steven Del Duca quit after the party won just eight seats - the MPP for Guelph said Tuesday he will stay Green "to remain focused on the need for climate action."

"So many people told me that having even one Green voice in this legislature makes a huge difference," Schreiner told reporters.

"I get emotional about a whole generation of people like my two daughters, deeply concerned about their future, wondering if they'll be able to afford to even own a home, wondering what kind of climate they're going to inherit," Schreiner added, his voice cracking.

"My gosh, we're experiencing the climate crisis right now. And it's only the tip of the iceberg."

Schreiner has been Green leader since 2009 and was first elected MPP in 2018. He is the only Green member of the legislature.

His decision on an issue that had created tension between Liberal factions came as MPPs returned to Queen's Park after a two-month winter break.

"The divisive draft Schreiner campaign ... has stuttered to a close," said Gabrielle Gallant, a communications consultant and former Liberal political staffer from the party's years in government.

Schreiner acknowledged the Greens had begun planning for an interim leader should he bolt and insisted his flirtation with the Liberals has not damaged his reputation.

"I have no regrets whatsoever. This province faces serious challenges. And that requires us to explore a variety of options."

Interim Liberal Leader John Fraser said he was "not in any way surprised" by Schreiner's remaining with the Greens.

A January letter imploring Schreiner to quit and run for Liberal leader was signed by former Liberal cabinet ministers Deb Matthews, Greg Sorbara, Liz Sandals, and John Milloy, ex-leader Lyn McLeod, Liberal MPP Lucille Collard (Ottawa-Vanier), and by Kate Graham, who finished third in the 2020 Liberal leadership race and has lost as a Liberal candidate in London North Centre in the last two provincial elections.

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"Our party needs to rediscover a politics of purpose and principle ... that's why we're turning to you," the letter said. "That is why we are taking this unprecedented step."

Graham said on Twitter she was "sad" to hear the decision from Schreiner, but praised his call for progressive parties to work together.

The odds against Schreiner winning the Liberal leadership were high, one veteran Liberal strategist told the Star.

"He would have faced enormous challenges to qualify as a candidate and attract support," said Marcel Wieder, who noted Schreiner has been campaigning for the Green candidate in the March 16 Hamilton Centre byelection to replace former NDP leader Andrea Horwath, who was MPP for the riding.

"I don't think the rank and file would have been wanting to elect a new leader who's been a Liberal for five minutes."

The party will debate a constitutional amendment at its annual general meeting on the first weekend in March that would require leadership candidates to be members of the party since Jan. 1 of this year - which, if passed, would have disqualified Schreiner.

That convention, in Hamilton, will set the rules for the Liberal leadership contest to come. No date has been set.

Had he crossed to the Liberals, Schreiner would have left the Greens with no representation in the legislature - a serious blow to the movement that has had difficulty gaining a foothold in the province.

Many Liberals considered the effort to draft Schreiner an insult given that several party members have already signalled interest in the leadership.

MPPs Mitzie Hunter (Scarborough-Guildwood), Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands) and Dr. Adil Shamji (Don Valley East), as well as MPs Yasir Naqvi (Ottawa Centre) and Nathaniel Erskine-Smith, (Beaches-East York) are exploring leadership bids.

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